

WASHINGTON POST
24 March 1987

Zia Says Pakistan Capable of Building A-Weapon

He Denies Military Intent, but Remark Prompts a Warning From India

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NEW DELHI, March 23—Pakistani President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq declared in a magazine interview published today that his country has developed the capability of building a nuclear weapon. But he reiterated his long-held public position that "Pakistan is not indulging in a nuclear experiment for military purposes."

Zia's statement, coupled with recent remarks attributed to the country's top nuclear scientist, appear to place Pakistan's nuclear research efforts in a new context at a time when the U.S. Congress is considering legislation on nuclear nonproliferation and a major new aid program for the South Asian nation contingent on U.S. administration assurances that Pakistan is not building a nuclear weapon.

The comments also brought warnings by Indian officials that they may respond by reviewing their own nuclear program. India first detonated a nuclear device in 1974 and is thought to be well ahead of Pakistan in developing nuclear weaponry.

The Pakistani president appeared aware of the sensitivity of the issue. Responding to a question about the current debate in Congress, he said he believed that the "United States of America—the senators and congressmen—will look to the higher national interest rather than this tiddly-widdly nuclear program."

[The State Department said yesterday that it had no comment on the interview.]

While Zia and other Pakistani officials have spoken previously about the ease of learning about nuclear weapons technology, Zia's remarks in the interview with Time magazine appear to be the most explicit acknowledgement yet that the subject has been actively pursued, at least at the research level. Pakistani officials at all levels have insisted for years that their nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes.

Earlier this month, The Observer of London quoted Pakistan's chief nuclear scientist, Abdel Qader

Khan, as saying that his country has succeeded in producing weapons-grade uranium and making a nuclear bomb. Pakistan later denied that Khan made the statement, but his interviewers insist he did.

U.S. intelligence assessments reportedly have said Pakistan has succeeded in enriching uranium to weapons grade and has tested a nuclear triggering device, although U.S. officials say they do not believe Pakistan has a nuclear device.

Responding to a question about a London newspaper quoting a Belgian scientist as saying Pakistani scientists had told him the country could build a bomb in a month, Zia responded in the interview:

"For that you don't have to quote a scientist from Belgium. You can virtually write today that Pakistan can build a bomb whenever it wishes. What's the difficulty about a bomb?"

"Once you have acquired the technology, which Pakistan has, you can do whatever you like. You can use it for peaceful purposes only; you can also utilize [it] for military purposes. We have never said we are incapable of doing this. We have said we have neither the intention nor the desire.

"Pakistan has the capability of building the bomb."

President Reagan is understood to have believed he received assurances from Zia during a visit to Washington in December 1982 that Pakistan would not develop nuclear weapons. Later U.S. intelligence assessments raised questions about whether the nature of those assurances, as understood by Reagan, was being adhered to.

Under U.S. nuclear nonproliferation laws, aid must be halted to a country shown to be importing nuclear weapons technology. That legislation is up for congressional review, as is the new multibillion-dollar military and economic aid program for Pakistan.

In addition, under a 1985 U.S. congressional requirement, the president must certify annually that Pakistan does not have a nuclear device. Administration officials say there is little chance that Reagan can provide Congress with "reliable assurance" that Pakistan is not moving toward building one.

The congressional debate has pitted opponents of nuclear proliferation against those who say Pakistan's role in pressing the war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan should be paramount.

In Pakistan, almost any public discussion favors building a bomb, citing India's nuclear weapons capability.

U.S. Ambassador Dean Hinton publicly raised concerns about Pakistan's nuclear program in a speech in Islamabad a month ago, drawing angry responses from prominent Pakistanis and the press. Hinton urged Pakistan to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty as a sign of its good intentions.

Among those criticizing Hinton's speech was Zain Noorani, minister of state for foreign affairs. He charged in Parliament that U.S. nuclear legislation is "deliberately formulated to exempt other countries which have acquired enrichment or separation capacity. For instance, it has not been applied to India even after India admitted publicly in 1986 that it can enrich uranium to any level.

"No power on earth can deter us from pursuing our peaceful nuclear program," Noorani said.

Noorani's remarks were Pakistan's public answer to Washington and the government's answer to public cries for an even more open weapons program. In private, officials interviewed recently in Islamabad tried to project a more cautious front, with an eye to both Washington and New Delhi.

"I have heard this [the nuclear weapons option] mentioned in higher echelons of government," said one official, who said the arguments offered against developing a bomb include the prohibitive cost, India's great lead in the field and questions about delivery systems.

"Pakistan is not in a race with India in the nuclear field. They are at least 20 years ahead of us," the official said. "Even if Pakistan got some modest capability to experiment, it was only in the mid-1980s. They are way ahead of us and we

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won't catch them, so don't get in a race." On the delivery issue, he said, "Even if some foolish government made a bomb, how could we deliver it? Gone are the days when you could send a bomber over Delhi and escort it with fighters."

As a result of the Zia interview, however, officials in New Delhi warned that a policy review could be under way.

"We have been consistent in saying we don't want to develop nuclear weapons, but we have seen Pakistan go in this direction," said an Indian official. "We would like to follow our policy, but down the line, as the situation develops, we will have to review our policies. We will have to look at the security environment in a cold, hard way."